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AUTHOR Suggs, Patricia K.; Kivett, Vira R.
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ABSTRACT

Retrospective strategies measuring perceived life changes over time can further the advancement of life span developmental research. Researchers have neglected the individual's perception of his/her life changes over time. This study attempts to determine discriminators of change over time as operationalized by perceptions of change. Subjects (N=321) were adults, 65 years and older living in a rural area who were administered a 141-item questionnaire covering general information, work, retirement, income, health, family, activities, roles, and subjective well-being. Perception of life changes was measured by the way in which older adults perceived their life situation over time. Results showed that perceptions of change in life satisfaction among older adults could be classified as either better or worse according to a combination of physical and social variables. Good health, possession of a confidant, sufficient income, and filial association were factors which distinguished positive and negative aging. Methodological outcomes of this study suggest the utility of retrospective strategies as a cost effective measure and a reliable alternative to longitudinal research for the determination of life changes. (Study data tables are appended.) (ABL)

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Perceptions of Life Changes: An Alternate Measure of Aging Through Time[1]

Patricia K. Suggs, M. Div., M. Ed.[2]

Vira R. Kivett, Ph. D.[2]

(Expanded Summary)

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[1]Project NCARS 13822. The Cooperative State Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C. (Data collected in 1980-81).

[2]Department of Child Development and Family Relations, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, 27412; and the North Carolina Agricultural Research Service, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, 27650.

Retrospective strategies measuring perceived life changes over time can aid in the advancement of life span developmental research. According to Schaie (1984) and Ryff (1984), there are alternative characteristics of events that can be used to mark historical time, that previously have not been given adequate attention. One such alternative is the perception of an event, as subjectively perceived by an individual. The rescaling of historical time such as through the use of behavior-relevant events (general life circumstances) enables the assignment of psychological rather than physical (birth cohorts) meaning to a construct of calendar time. Studies of life satisfaction have, in the main, measured status quo rather than change over time. Typically, in order to predict change in life satisfaction over time, researchers have had to resort to longitudinal studies which are costly and time consuming. Retrospective research strategies can enable the prediction of successful aging over time with less difficulty and cost.

A neglected area of research is that of the individual's perception of his/her life changes over time. According to Schaie (1984), a broadened concept of period exists which mark historical time with perceptions of events as subjectively perceived by individuals. Information on the predictors of life changes is of value to practitioners and others concerned with the long-term subjective well-being of older adults. The purpose

of the present study was to determine discriminators of change over time as operationalized by perceptions of change.

PROCEDURES

Sample

The present study was a secondary analysis of 321 adults, 65 years and older living in a rural transitional county in North Carolina. A compact cluster sampling technique was utilized whereby census tracts were clustered and, based upon a sampling ratio, a random selection of areas was made. All persons 65 years and older living within the selected areas and agreeing to participate were interviewed.

Measurement

Trained interviewers administered a 141 item questionnaire which covered seven major areas: general information, work and retirement, income, health, family, activities and roles, and subjective well-being. Only those items relevant to the present study were included.

The dependent variable, perception of life changes, was measured by the way in which older adults perceived their life situation over time. Respondents were asked to respond to the following statement: "As I get older, things are better/worse than I thought they would be". Responses were worse, better (coded 1 to 2 respectively).

There were seven discriminating variables included in the analysis. Association (activities done together) was a measure

of the frequency with which older adults had engaged in 11 activities with their child of most contact during the past year (Bengtson, Olander, & Haddad, 1976). Activities included areas such as happy occasions, shopping, and reunions. Responses ranged from never to daily (coded 1 to 9 respectively). Self-rated health of the older adult was a self-rated measure using the Cantril Ladder technique. Respondents were shown a picture of a ladder and told that the top rung represented excellent health and the bottom rung represented poor health. They were asked to rate their health at the present time by showing their place on the ladder (0 represented poor and 9 represented excellent health). Adequacy of income was a self-perceived measure whereby respondents were asked to describe their present financial situation. Responses ranged from, always have enough money for everything needed to never have enough for things needed (coded 1 to 4 respectively). Confidant was a dummy variable which measured the presence or absence of a confidant (1 represented absence and 2 represented presence). Marital status was a dummy variable noting the status of the older adult (married, single (single/separated/divorced/widowed) at the present time, with single being the referent. Help given measured the amount of help given during the past year. Respondents were asked the frequency with which they had given aid in 11 areas to their children during the past year. Help received was measured by asking the respondents the extent to which they had received help

from their children during the past year. Both help given and help received used a nine-point response scale ranging from never to daily (coded 1 to 9 respectively). A factor analysis was performed which reduced the number of items of both the help given and help received scale to 10 items each.

ANALYSIS OF DATA AND RESULTS

A discriminant analysis was used to determine the discriminators of perceived change in life situations of rural/transitional older adults. The dependent variable was the perceived life situation of older adults. Discriminators entered into the model supported the subjective well-being literature (Larson, 1978) and included: marital status, health, adequacy of income, help given by the older adult to child of most contact, help received by the older adult from child of most contact, and association (activities done with child of most contact). Frequencies for selected variables were computed for descriptive purposes.

Approximately 64% of the sample was female and 36% male. The mean age of the sample was 74 years and the mean educational level was 9.5 years. Approximately 57% of the sample was married. Average to good health was reported by approximately 73%. Enough income for everything needed was reported by 39%, with 41% reporting they usually had enough money for things needed. Approximately 86% of the sample lived within one hour of their children of most contact. The more prevalent activities

older adults engaged in with their children of most contact at least once per year included home recreation (42%), family reunions (56%), happy occasions (85%), and emergencies (32%) (See Table 1). As shown in Table 2 help exchanged was limited. Most of the help received by the older adult from their children of most contact were in the areas of transportation (60%), illness (45%), and making decisions (44%). Help given by older adults to children of most contact dealt in the main with transportation (23%) and making decisions (21%). Approximately 36% of the sample perceived their life situation as getting worse as they became older while 64% perceived it as getting better.

[Place Tables 1 and 2 about here]

Results of the discriminant analysis showed that, overall, 72% of the respondents could be classified correctly according to perceived life status by five classifying variables ($F(5,1)=7.95$, $p<.0001$). Those persons reporting that their life situation was getting better had the highest percent of grouped cases correctly classified, 86%; followed by those who perceive their life situation as getting worse, 47%. Prior probabilities, or that proportion which might have been classified correctly by chance alone, according to group were: better, 63%; and worse, 37%. (See Table 3).

[Place Table 3 about here]

The function, which explained 14% of the variance in the model, was derived from five classifying variables. The most

important variables in terms of their relative discriminating power were self-rated health, possession of a confidant, adequacy of income, association (activities done with child of most contact) and help received by the older adult from child of most contact. Persons who were in better health, had a confidant relationship, had a sufficient income for their needs, engaged in more activities with their children, and received less help from their children perceived their life situation as getting better as they aged. (See Table 4).

[Place Table 4 about here]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, results showed that perceptions of change in life satisfaction among older adults can be classified as either better or worse according to a combination of physical and social variables. Good health, possession of a confidant, sufficient income, filial association, and low filial assistance are factors which distinguish between positive and negative aging. The findings show that the discriminators of perceived life changes in the present study supported the literature with regard to contributors to life satisfaction measured at one point in time. Scheidt (1984), for example, in a study of 990 rural residents, found that persons who were partially or fully engaged in society displayed better mental and physical health, engaged in informal and formal activities, had a confidant, and were involved in informal mutual aid networks. Similarly, Larson's (1978)

comprehensive review of the literature on life satisfaction found health and income to be significant contributors to life satisfaction. The potential reliability of the retrospective strategy as utilized in this paper was further supported by earlier longitudinal findings. Palmore and Kivett (1977) in a study of the predictors of change in life satisfaction over time also found health and association (activities done together) to be significant predictors. As a result, methodological outcomes of the present study suggest the utility of retrospective strategies as a cost effective measure and a reliable alternative for the determination of life changes. These results do not advocate the abandonment of longitudinal research in favor of more easily utilized strategies. They do suggest, however, along with Schaie (1984) and Ryff (1984), that historical time may be alternately defined in terms of perception of events which in turn may add a more obtainable and humanistic approach to life-span developmental research (Schaie, 1984).

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Table 1

Percentages of Older Adults Engaged in Certain Activities with their Children One or More Times During the Past Year.[a]

Type of Activity	%
Commercial recreation	17
Home recreation	42
Outdoor recreation	20
Visits	82
Family reunions	56
Emergency	32
Working together	4
Babysitting	11
Happy occasions	85
Church	52
Shop together	45
Vacation	24
Other	1

[a] $\underline{N}$=321.

Table 2

Percentages of Older Adults Reporting Help Given to and Received from Children One or More Times during the Past Year.[a]

Assistance	Help given %	Help received %
Transportation	23	60
Household repairs	9	35
Housekeeping	10	31
Shopping	16	41
Yardwork	17	29
Car care	5	17
Help in illness	11	45
Decision making	21	44
Legal aid	1	11
Financial aid	8	2
Other aid	1	0

[a] $N=321$.

Table 3

Percent of Adults Correctly Classified According to Group Memberships.[a]

Group	Group 1 %	Group 2 %
1 Worse	46.5	53.5
2 Better	13.7	86.3

Note. Percent of "grouped" cases correctly classified, 72.01%. Percentage identified correctly are shown on the diagonal. Other figures show percentage of a group overlapping.

[a] N=250 (71 cases have deleted from the analysis because of missing data).

Table 4

Variables Discriminating Levels of Perceived Life Changes Over Time.[a]

Function	Variables	Discriminant Coefficients
I	Association	.33
	Self-rated health	.68
	Perceived adequacy of income	-.25
	Possession of a confidant	.29
	Helping behaviors	-.26

R^2=.14, $F(5,1)$=7.95, p<.0001

[a] N=250 (71 cases were deleted from the analysis because of missing data).